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Essential Practices for Disciplinary Literacy Instruction in Secondary Classrooms

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Cover Page Footnote

Many thanks to Victoria Les, Liz Lietz, Melissa Brooks-Yip, and Laura Gabrion for contributing to this article.

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by Jenelle Williams



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“...an effective disciplinary literacy instructional framework must consider students’ developing identities—identities as students, as citizens, as social beings, and as knowledge creators” (Dobbs, 2017). To what extent are students’ current educational experiences supporting students’ identity development in such ways? Do secondary ELA courses offer opportunities for students to use their developing skills in authentic ways that impact their world?

Participants in the Disciplinary Literacy Task Force’s “Deeper Dive” professional learning series began their first session with these questions. Using the School Reform Initiative’s Student Profiles protocol, participants began by exploring their own identities as high school students, and together we considered the identities of the students currently in our classrooms. How might school be supporting (or hindering) healthy identity development?

This led us to “walk in a student’s shoes” as we evaluated the learning experiences and typical assignments

faced by an eighth grader this fall. We considered the vocabulary, textual demands, and other expectations that students must navigate within one school day, as well as scaffolding provided by each teacher. Knowing that disciplinary literacy instruction requires us to shift toward student-centered pedagogy, we also considered to what extent the following criteria were present:

- Assessment is multidimensional and supports learning;
- Students collaborate to solve problems and answer their own questions;
- Students own their learning; and
- Students construct knowledge, while teachers facilitate and support learning.

Whether we use the term place-based, project-based, or inquiry-based learning, we know that providing students with authentic, intriguing reasons to engage in a unit of study is key. For this reason, our Deeper Dive participants spent time considering what Disciplinary Literacy Essential Practice #1 calls for teachers to do. Regardless of discipline, secondary teachers are called to develop and implement interactive problem-based units of instruction that frame authentic problems to help establish purposes for students to read, write, and communicate beyond being assigned or

expected to do so (e.g. for their enjoyment/interest, to ask and answer abstract and authentic questions about the community and individual lives, to address needs in their community or beyond, and to communicate with a specific audience).

So, what exactly makes a good problem frame, an authentic reason to kick off a unit of study? Dr. Darin Stockdill of the University of Michigan, one of the lead researchers for the Essential Practices for Disciplinary Literacy, offers the following criteria. A good problem frame, he contends:

- is authentic and has value outside of the school;
- requires the use of important content;
- generates a range of supporting questions;
- involves a reasonable amount of content and time;
- requires higher-order, conceptual thinking but can be scaffolded as appropriate to provide access for all students;
- is open and/or debatable, and has more than one possible approach or answer;
- can sustain the interest of students and connect to their communities; and
- is appropriate in terms of access to available materials and resources.

Developing authentic problem frames for units of study can be intimidating at first, but there are plenty of great examples and resources out there. English Language Arts teachers at the secondary level may consider exploring the resources available through groups such as KQED Learn, *The New York Times* Learning Network, PBL Works, Compose Our World, and the Right Question Institute (see links below). For more in-depth study in this area, Gholdy Muhammad's *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* offers insights on shifting instruction in order to develop students' identity, skills, intellect, and criticality in meaningful, authentic ways. One sample lesson, designed for a tenth through twelfth grade World Literature classroom, asks students to "think about themselves as writers and consider the stories in their lives that were most influential [in] shaping their sense of self." (Muhammad, 2020, p.164). With resources such as those mentioned above,

secondary ELA teachers will be well poised to frame authentic problem frames for each of their units of study.

Keep in touch. Where are you at in your disciplinary literacy journey? Follow us @GELN612Literacy and contact jenelle.williams@oakland.k12.mi.us for more information on joining the Deeper Dive Institute in the remaining months of the 2020-21 academic year. Also, I offer many thanks to Victoria Les, Liz Lietz, Melissa Brooks-Yip, and Laura Gabrion for contributing to this article.

References

- Dobbs, C. L., Ippolito, J., & Charner-Laird, M. (2017). *Investigating disciplinary literacy: a framework for collaborative professional learning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators General Education Leadership Network Disciplinary Literacy Task Force (2019) *Essential instructional practices in disciplinary literacy: 6 to 12*.
- Muhammad, G., & Love, B. L. (2020). *Cultivating genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Additional Links

KQED Learn: <learn.kqed.org>

The New York Times Learning Network: <www.nytimes.com/section/learning>

PBL Works: <www.pblworks.org>

Compose Our World: <sprocket.lucasedresearch.org/ela9> and <composeourworld.org/blog/>

The Right Question Institute: <rightquestion.org>

Author Biography

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